No. 69

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

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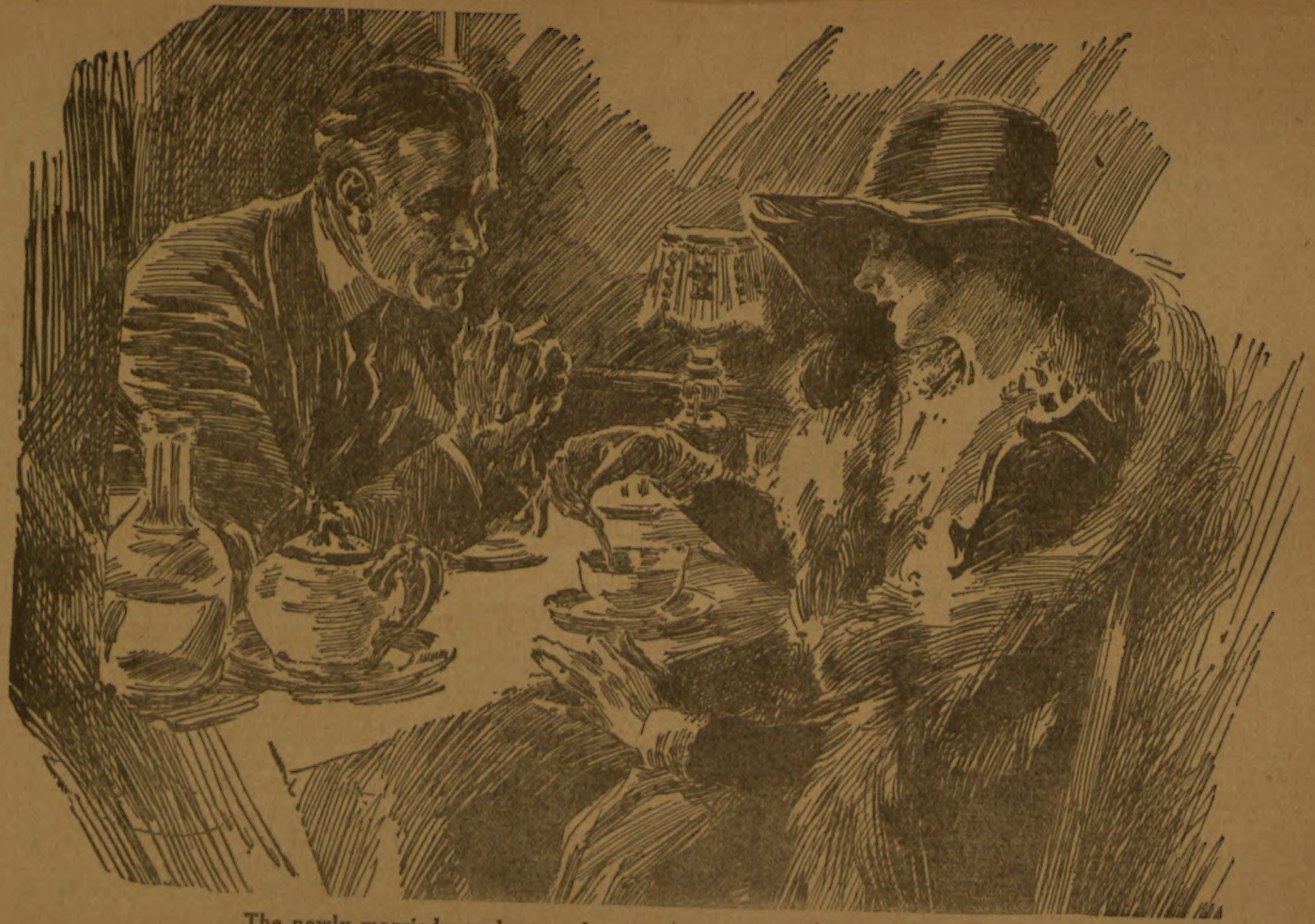

The newly married couple passed a most enjoyable evening. Of the two Lillian was apparently the happiest. Victor Talbot was now her husband in the sight of God and the world.

R. of M. G., No. 69.

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Cincinnati, Ohio.

AN UNUSUALLY handsome young couple were waiting at the door of Mr. Shields residence desiring to speak to Mr. Shields. "I am sorry, but he is not at home," the girl told them with a winsome smile.

The couple looked at one another, disappointed.

"Can I leave a message for him?" the man said. "I am Mr. Talbot, and Mr. Shields and I are friends. If you will permit me to write a few lines in his study, I'll appreciate it very much."

"Certainly, sir," the servant replied, swinging the door wide open. "Please come in."

Victor Talbot and his lovely young bride, had just arrived in the city from Canada.

They had come to the home of Mr. Shields to get some information of the whereabouts of Marie Desmond, who had so loyally stood by them during their difficulties.

They did not have the least idea that they would find Marie in the house. As they walked arm in arm toward the study, someone came slowly down the stairs.

It was Lillian who recognized Marie first.

The next moment they were on each other's bosom with cries of joyous delight. Victor Talbot stood by, his handsome face beaming.

"We are married," were Lillian's first words as soon as she was able to speak coherently. "Victor and I were married in Quebec, Canada. Ah, I can not tell you how happy I am."

Tears came into Marie's eyes.

"Let me congratulate you both," she said, her voice soft. "I can imagine how happy you must be." She kissed the youthful bride affectionately, then gave Victor her hand. "Now come into the drawing room. I am anxious to hear all about this wonderful romance of yours."

As soon as they were seated Lillian, bubbling over with joy and vivacity, burst out in a veritable flood of words.

She told how she had gone to Quebec with Margaret Wentworth and everything that happened there.

There was very little she omitted. It seemed to give her pleasure to relate how she had brought Margaret Wentworth and Gerard Mirabeau together.

She spoke feelingly about her meeting with the French artist's mother and how devoted she was to her only son.

"We left behind an epidemic of happiness," she concluded. "Margaret and Gerard are to be married shortly, and Ethel Sanders, who is Margaret's cousin, is to wed an elderly, but very rich Englishman."

Marie embraced Lillian again.

"I am happy with you," she murmured. "I hope and pray your step-mother may give you her blessing."

"We don't care much whether she does or not. Do we, Victor?" The pretty bride glanced at her husband. "One thing is sure, she can not invoke the law in order to separate us. We were legally married."

Talbot's smile had an element of pathos in it. No, he did not fear Lillian's step-mother. They were now beyond that woman's reach.

But he feared the sharp tongues of scandal mongers. Would they forget that he had been in prison charged with murder?

Inwardly he vowed that he would kill anyone who dared make his adorable bride suffer because of that.

"We are on our way home, Miss Desmond," he said, reaching for Lillian's hand and caressing it. "I intend to give Mrs. Crawford an opportunity to accept me as her son-in-law, or refuse. It makes little difference either way."

"I think she'll make the best of it now and accept you," was Marie's opinion. "At least, I hope she does."

In the general conversation which followed, the governess divulged the fact that she had the Gordon children with her, and that she intended to leave for the South in perhaps a week.

Lillian and Victor were both very sorry to hear this. They had hoped that Marie would be a frequent visitor at their home during the winter.

"But we can make up for that now," Marie suggested with a soft laugh. "Stay with me a few days here. There is plenty of room, and I know Mr. Shields will be glad to see you both when he comes back."

Talbot vetoed the idea. Certain circumstances made it imperative that he return to his estate at once.

However, they remained for the rest of the day, most of which was spent recounting past experiences and incidents.

When evening came, the happy young couple set out for their home.

And then came another day — a day Marie was not likely to forget for the rest of her life.

As she was busy with the children upstairs about eight o'clock in the morning, the maid came to inform her that a gentleman was below who wished to speak to her personally.

"Who is he?" she asked, her heart skipping a beat.

"He did not give his name," came back. "But he says he must see you at once on a matter of importance."

With a feeling of instinctive fear, the governess went downstairs. In the reception room she met a big man, whose vulgar features and sharp eyes gave her an unpleasant shock.

He rose at once and assumed an air of authority.

"Are you Miss Desmond—Marie Desmond?" he

inquired tersely.

"That is my name," she acknowledged with a lump in her throat. "And who are you, sir?"

With a deliberate motion the man reached into his pocket and produced the credentials which showed that he was a police official.

"A complaint has been filed against you for kidnapping, Miss Desmond," he said. "You are the governess of the Gordon children at Oak Manor. You were discharged by Mrs. Alice Gordon, but in leaving you took the children in your care with you without permission."

Deathly pallor spread over Marie's face.

"Who has filed this complaint?" she asked in a trembling tone.

"Mrs. Alice Gordon, the stepmother of the children," the officer replied.

"Oh!" gasped Marie, and reached for the back of a chair to support herself.

The man took a step toward her, his heavy jaw set.

"Well, is it true?" he demanded. "Did you take the Gordon children with you without permission?"

"I did," she confessed, quickly recovering her self-possession. "But Mrs. Alice Gordon has no right to bring such an accusation against me, for I had Mr. Gordon's consent and instructions to take the children South for the winter."

The officer grinned disagreeably.

"Did Mr. Gordon know that you took the children away on that particular day?" he inquired, that grin still in evidence.

"No, he did not," she responded slowly. "But I notified him before I left Oak Manor. There was an understanding between us that gave me the privilege to take the children South with me whenever their health

demanded a change of climate."

For some time the man did not speak again. He continued to stare at the beautiful woman before him.

"Well," he drawled at last, "I really don't like to do this but——"

"Do what?" Marie broke in quickly.

"Arrest you, Miss Desmond."

She shrank back with a hoarse cry.

"Arrest me?" It was a horrified gasp.

The officer nodded.

"Yes, that is what I was sent here to do," he declared. "This document here—" tapping an official folded paper with his finger— "states that one Marie Desmond is wanted at police headquarters for kidnapping. It also requires that the two Gordon children must come along with us."

The room was whirling around. Something like a hoarse cry escaped the unhappy woman's lips, then she sank, half fainting, into a chair.

Chapter 226

A CRISIS

PHILIP GORDON had things pretty well in shape at the copper mines. In a few more days he would be able to return home. When he received the letter from Miss Desmond which stated that she was leaving because his wife was again playing the mistress at Oak Manor, he swore softly to himself.

How dared Alice intrude where she had no longer a moral right to be. Well, there was only one thing to be done. He must tell this woman to get out.

In all haste he made arrangements to go home at once. His affairs he placed into the hands of a new and competent superintendent. There was a dangerous glint in his eyes as he boarded the train.

"I'll show her!" he muttered as he sat in the smoking car, chewing the end of his cigar. "This is the last straw. I don't care what our so-called friends will say. Scandal or no scandal—I'll throw her out bodily if she refuses to go.

"Well," he added with a sigh of relief, "I am glad Miss Desmond took the children with her. I won't have to worry about them."

It was late in the evening when at last he reached Oak Manor. Without delay he made his way to his wife's boudoir. He was fiercely determined that Alice must leave this very night.

He knocked on the door several times. When he received no response, he jerked the door open and entered the room.

To his surprise, he found Alice's rooms in darkness, and the housekeeper who came at his call, informed him that Mrs. Gordon had left but a few hours since.

Although Phil had been anxious to make Alice understand her actual position, he was rather glad to have been spared a meeting with the woman whom he hated and despised from his very soul.

He went to the library to look over the papers and correspondence that had accumulated during his absence.

He was busily engaged in this occupation when Becker, the steward brought in to him a telegram addressed to Alice which had just arrived.

Phil opened it without hesitation. It was a notification from the Chicago police that Marie Desmond and two children had been traced to their hiding place. It further stated that the necessary steps had been taken to put Miss Desmond into custody while the children would be taken back to Oak Manor, unless called for.

Thunderstruck, Phil stared at the telegram.

"What is all this?" he cried. "How am I to understand this telegram? What have the police to do with Miss Desmond and my children?"

"Beg pardon, sir, but I think I can tell you," began the steward. "There was quite a scene between Mrs. Gordon and Miss Desmond, at least so I heard from the housekeeper.

"Mrs. Gordon ordered the governess to leave at once, which she did—taking the children and also Annie with her. No one knew that she had not left the house alone. In the morning, when Mrs. Gordon found out what had happened, she was almost beside herself.

"Somehow she found out that Miss Desmond had headed for Chicago. Then she got in touch with the police department there and this telegram is the result."

As coolly as he could, Phil asked:

"And where has Mrs. Gordon gone?"

"I don't know, sir, but at all events she went to Chicago," replied the steward. "Two days had passed without her hearing from the police there, and she became very impatient and said she would go to Chicago herself and take the children as soon as they were found."

Phil's jaws closed grimly.

With a motion of the hand, he dismissed the steward, telling him he would go into the business affairs, which Becker wanted to discuss, on the following day.

Left alone, Phil lived through again in his mind the torments of the past and was tortured by the confusion of the present and the uncertainty of the future.

He cursed his weakness in having let matters run their course. Why had he not refused his father-in-law's demands; why had he agreed to take Alice back?

What trouble and care he would have been spared! He would have protected Marie from insult to which she was exposed at Alice's hands and the new humiliation which the latter was now holding in store for her.

He looked up at the clock which was ticking the hours drearily away. It was too late to do anything. It was useless to start for Chicago before morning.

He could not sleep and spent the grater part of the dark, lonely hours pacing about the room.

Great as was his hatred for Alice, even more intense was his love for Marie. The latter had acted in the goodness of her heart in taking the children with her, endeavoring to shield them from the cruelty of their stepmother during his absence.

What a shock it would be for Marie when the police came for her! She could have no idea of such

possibility.

Oh, that he could reach her before the police, so that he could protect her! The struggle in his heart which he had in vain endeavored to control, burst out afresh.

Men and women never struggle so hard as when they struggle alone — without witness, counsellor or confidant; unencouraged, unadvised and unpitied.

Philip Gordon was in such a position. No one knew of the pent-up sorrows in his breast; he bore them alone.

He loved Marie—loved her above everything, and must be silent.

He was desperate in the hopelessness of his case. What could he do? Life was full of sorrow, past and present; and in the future there lurked no promise of better things.

The night was one of troubled sleep. With the break of day he was up and made preparations to leave for Chicago at once. There was a commuter's train which left at six.

His first move on reaching Chicago was to hail a taxicab in which, in all defiance of speed laws, he made a dash for police headquarters. He was bitterly disappointed to learn that an officer had already been sent out with a warrant for Miss Desmond.

"Great God! I have come too late," he cried. "She has been atrociously and falsely accused! I myself, the father of the children, gave her permission to take them with her!"

"Be calm, Mr. Gordon," urged the inspector. "The officer left only a short while ago. Perhaps we can still find him at Miss Desmond's residence if we leave at once."

Phil acceded gladly to this proposition.

The inspector took a memorandum of Marie's address and in a moment hurried with Phil to the waiting automobile.

"Number 240, Ashland Boulevard," he cried to the chauffeur.

"Drive as fast as you can," added Phil. "Five dollars if you make it in twenty minutes and ten dollars if you make it in fifteen!"

"I guess we shall have to forget traffic laws for the lady's benefit, Mr. Gordon," remarked the inspector jocularly, with a wink to the chauffeur to proceed with all speed.

Gordon's eye was caught by the memorandum of Marie's address which the inspector still held in his hand —"care of R. W. Shields," it read.

"Shields—R. W. Shields!" mused Phil.

Why, that was the name of the lawyer with whom he had negotiated the new loan. Yes, and that was also the name of the lawyer who had represented his first wife in the divorce proceedings which were instituted shortly after he had refused to receive her again as his wife.

It was the same Mr. Shields whom he had known practically all his life. Why had the governess gone to him with the children? What was the bond of friendship existing between Miss Desmond and the old lawyer?

In the drawing room of the Shields residence, Marie sat pale and crushed in the chair into which she

had sunk, unable to utter a word.

The children were to be taken from her, and she —she did not know what to dread.

Mr. Shields was not at home to protect her or to advise her. He was out of town and could not be back before evening.

Despairingly, she clasped her hands.

"If you please, madam, do not make unnecessary trouble," said the officer impatiently. "Dress the children and come with me to the station house. There will be a taxi at the door in a few minutes."

"Oh God, I cannot bear the disgrace," moaned Marie. "I beg you to leave us here at least until my attorney, Mr. Shields, comes home. He will straighten out everything and furnish security for me."

"I am very sorry, Miss Desmond," replied the officer, "but I cannot wait. My instructions are to bring you and the children with me, and I must obey my orders."

Marie felt as though she would faint. The children must not be taken from her. They must not be brought to the police station!

There was a way to avoid the disgrace and to spare the children the fright. But there was only one way. She had but to speak a word and no one would have the right to accuse her of any guilt, nor to take the children from her.

She had only to say, "I am their mother!" Mr. Shields could establish this fact, and the case against her would collapse.

As she saw the officer moving impatiently, she arose, standing bravely erect.

In her excitement she did not hear the ring of the door bell. She did not hear that someone—a man—was asking for her in quick, anxious tones.

She was resolved. She hesitated no longer. She would throw off the mask, come what will!

Firmly she spoke to the officer:

"You will not take me to the station house, you will not take the children from me! Mrs. Gordon has nothing to say about them. Only the father or the mother have the right to question my motive. I am the——"

That instant the door was opened violently, and Philip Gordon entered.

Chapter 227

LILLIAN'S APPEAL

THE HOME COMING of Victor Talbot and his lovely young bride did not create much of a stir in the neighborhood. A few of Talbot's close personal friends called on them, but most of the neighbors held themselves aloof. To Lillian it seemed more like a dream than reality to have a home where only love and kindness dwelled.

Her husband fairly worshipped her. Everyone of her slightest wishes was granted with the same adoring smile.

While Talbot still worried secretly about his connection with the Roger Hawkins murder, he retained an outward air of cheerfulness.

"Will you ever regret having married me, darling?" he asked Lillian one evening as she rested in his arms.

Her laugh held reproach.

"Regret having married you?" she repeated, kissing him. "Why, you silly boy. You have made me the happiest woman in all the world. Before I met you my life was empty and even miserable. And now?" She snuggled closer into her husband's arms and closed her eyes contentedly.

After a minute of blissful silence Victor inquired softly:

"Is there anything you would like to have changed?"

She thought for a moment, and her eyes grew misty.

"There is," she answered. "I wish we might be at peace with my step-mother. I had hoped that she would call and congratulate us. It hurts me to realize that she is still our enemy."

He released her and walked to the other side of the room. As he turned he regarded her curiously for a long while.

So far as he was concerned Mrs. Crawford had ceased to exist. He had absolutely no desire to have this woman disturb their Eden with a visit.

"I think I'll write her a nice letter," said Lillian. "We might at least be friends."

Talbot made no comment, although in his heart he hoped that no such letter was sent by his wife. He made no objection when Lillian went into the library. He knew what that meant. He lit his pipe and walked out of the house.

For almost an hour he strolled through the grounds. The night air was crisp and cold. Occasionally he glanced back toward the window through which streamed a shaft of light.

Once or twice he saw a shadow behind the curtain. Evidently Lillian was pacing the floor in indecision, or trying to find adequate words with which to address her step-mother.

But the shadow had not been made by his wife, for Lillian was seated at the desk writing rapidly.

The tone of her letter showed her nobility of soul. When it was finished she leaned back and read it. It said:

Dear Mother:

No doubt you know by this time that Victor

Talbot and I were married. I wish I could tell you how happy I am. And in that happiness of mine I can not help but think of you.

I wish with all my heart that you, too, might be happy. I want you to know that I do not feel bitter toward you.

The past is a closed and sealed book. I know I have caused you much worry. I believe that you had my best interest at heart when you tried to prevent my marriage with Victor. But you do not know what a wonderful man he is.

If I have hurt you by marrying without your knowledge and consent, I ask you to forgive me. Life is so short, dear mother. Why must we be enemies?

Won't you come and wish us luck? Victor and I will give you a hearty reception. Even a kind word written by you would help so much. We both want to love you. Won't you let us?

Lillian.

With the letter lying before her, she waited until her husband came in. There was just a faint frown on his face as he approached.

"Well, dear, have you finished your correspondence?" he asked with a smile.

"I have, and I want you to read what I have just written," she said.

Talbot took the sheet of paper handed to him. The frown on his face became more pronounced as he followed the closely written lines.

He was not at all satisfied to have Lillian write in

such a cordial tone to the woman who had been the cause of so much grief and pain.

In his eyes Lillian stood so far above Mrs. Crawford that it seemed incongruous to him for his wife to ask forgiveness. If any one was to make apologies, Mrs. Crawford should make them.

"What do you think of it, dear?" the young wife inquired when Victor dropped the letter on the desk. "Is it all right?"

"Why, of course, it is," he answered quickly, for he did not want to hurt Lillian's feelings. "I think it very generous on your part. I hope your stepmother will be equally generous."

The following morning the letter was mailed to Mrs. Crawford, but it failed to bring a reply.

When Lillian mentioned the matter to her husband, his brow contracted in angry lines. He considered it a shame to be ignored by Mrs. Crawford. Not that he cared for himself. It hurt him to see the shadows in his lovely young wife's eyes.

It provoked him to be reminded of the woman who had so openly evinced her enmity toward Lillian and himself.

The happiness in which the two lived allowed no discontent to take root in Lillian's heart. She resigned herself to the fact that her stepmother had left her friendly overtures unnoticed.

Victor, however, had no confidence in the apparent state of truce which existed. It seemed to him but a lull before a new and even more bitter fight.

Mrs. Crawford was of a passionate, revengeful nature which could not be subdued without force.

The young wife endeavored to take active participation in the household matters, but Mrs. Ruggles, the old housekeeper, would not hear of it, and there was

many a laughing tussle between them.

Still, it was impossible for Mrs. Ruggles to do all the work herself.

The rooms which had been closed for years were now opened and Lillian insisted that she must have help, to which Victor agreed.

Together, the young pair went to an employment bureau to hire a servant. Lillian stated her wishes and was informed that there was plenty of help to be had and that a maid would be sent later in the afternoon.

The day passed, and no one came. Nor did any applicant put in an appearance on the day following.

Lillian drove to the village alone and called again at the bureau. The woman in charge met her with embarrassment.

"Why have none of the girls come?" asked Lillian.

The woman grew red and fairly squirmed in her confusion.

"Oh, Mrs. Talbot," she cried, "the silly creatures. I tried hard to persuade them, but none of them would go."

"But why not," inquired Lillian unsuspectingly.

"Why, the foolish girls say your house must be haunted. The ghost of Mr. Hawkins, who was shot in the woods last spring, walks in the garret, they say. I told them all sorts of things to talk them out of their silly superstition, but I could not do anything with them."

Lillian became very pale, and a shadow crossed her charming face.

"I thank you for your trouble," she murmured, laying a bill on the desk and leaving hurriedly.

As fast as she could she drove away from the village. A deep sigh escaped her breast. It had come to this! Her home was avoided as a haunted place!

Poor Victor. Now she could understand what the proud man must have suffered. His acquittal in court did not hold good with the public. People still believed him a murderer!

How she reached home she never knew. She fled to her room there to be alone with her grief and to surrender unseen to her feelings in tears.

Before Victor came home, she carefully bathed her eyes that he might not see she had been crying; but it did not escape his loving observation.

He became anxious. Was the sombre past casting its shadow on his new-found happiness? Tenderly he embraced his wife and gazed deeply and searchingly into the eyes which shyly glanced aside.

"Lillian, darling, you have been crying," he accused. "Tell me what troubles you. Has someone hurt you?"

For a moment her lips quivered as though she was struggling with pain; but love conquers much. Smiling brightly, she denied having cried and her manner was so lively and care-free, that he finally believed he must have been deceived.

Lillian had resolved that he should and must not know anything of this. She would spare him the painful knowledge.

A few days passed. Lillian took her part in the housework in spite of Mrs. Ruggles' energetic protest. Sometimes, indeed, Lillian seemed somewhat tired when she came to the table.

The unaccustomed work was something of a strain upon her. Victor soon noticed this.

"But my dear," he objected, "why have you not taken a girl? Haven't they sent one yet?"

"No, not yet," she told him.

"Well this cannot go on," he said. "I have to go

to the village to-morrow. You must have a girl at once."

"No, no, Victor, don't go!" Lillian sprang up hastily.

Talbot guessed from her anxious tone, what she had so carefully concealed from him.

Taking her face between his hands, while a paleness spread over his own countenance, he asked in a low vibrating voice:

"Child, why have you not been frank with me? I felt that you were keeping something back Should we not bear our troubles together? Tell me what happened at the employment bureau, that you did not want to tell me."

She could not hold back the tears longer. Sobbing, she hid her face on his breast and related what the manager had said to her.

Talbot's face became set in his anger. With an effort he suppressed a groan.

Let the world do what it will. He would bear it patiently—but only let her be spared—the jewel of his soul.

Her tears fell like scalding drops on his heart. In bitterness he gnashed his teeth. What had this sweet, innocent young girl committed to deserve public censure and hatred?

During their honeymoon, all shadows seemed to have fled, and he had hardly given them a thought.

What was the world to him, now that Lillian was his? He had felt a sort of quivering happiness which carried him for a time out of himself and shed a sudden glow of joy over the simplest of things.

He tread the earth as if it had no care nor shade. His heart was filled with a kind of elastic buoyancy.

But now the clouds were gathered thickly about them and threatened to destroy the peace and happiness

of his house. This was more than hard.

In his first happiness at having Lillian for his own, he had indeed felt in the midst of it an undercurrent of sadness which made itself heard at times, whispering:

"This cannot last — banish it ere it bring woe." And so surely had it come.

He consoled Lillian as best he could, but still he realized that he could not console her, for the trouble ate its way into their hearts more and more, although both hid it from each other.

In the morning he drove to a nearby town and brought a modest young girl who knew nothing of his story; but how long would it be before gossip would reach her and cause her to desert?

This first cloud which had begun to obscure the sunshine of their married life would not allow itself to be quickly blown away.

Lillian was not so lighthearted and happy as before. Even she brooded over the cruelty of fate which darkened her husband's life.

She endeavored to surround him with redoubled love and attention, as though to indemnify him for the world's injustice.

With rage in his heart, Victor felt what troubled her, but he was powerless to do anything to bring a joyous smile to her lips.

One pleasure, however, was theirs. Dr. Van Buren called, not, as he jokingly said, to recommend himself for the position of family physician, but to congratulate them on their marriage.

"Well, Talbot, my idea was not so bad," said he, as he vigorously shook Victor's hand.

"Certainly not, doctor," the latter replied. "We really have to thank you that we acted so quickly."

Dr. Van Buren became a frequent visitor. To a certain extent he felt as if he must show how highly he esteemed Talbot and his wife.

With some concern, the young pair at last set about to make their duty calls.

With almost too far-fetched delicacy, Victor shrank from having his wife hurt by a word or an expression of the face. For him, these calls were a torture, but they were not to be avoided.

He took the greatest pains, however, not to allow Lillian to see how he was affected by these functions.

To their astonishment, they were now received with friendship everywhere. Neither the conversation nor the manner of their hosts showed that any prejudice was still held against Talbot.

This was a wonderful relief to them both. After all, only a few isolated individuals still believed him guilty in spite of his acquittal.

To be sure, Talbot had no idea that his marriage with the beautiful heiress had aroused a great deal of curiosity. Local society was much more interested in him and Lillian than he ever imagined.

Their romantic courtship and marriage was a topic of conversation at afternoon teas. Everywhere, there was much conjecture as to how the marriage would turn out in the end.

"Just think, Mrs. Allen," said Mrs. Pryor, the wife of the village druggist, to her neighbor, "if one of these days it is shown that Mr. Talbot, after all, was the man who shot Roger Hawkins! The poor woman would go crazy."

"Horrible," whispered Mrs. Allen, shuddering. "I dare not think of it. The poor young thing How love can lead one astray. I never would have let him have my daughter, fine fellow and well to do though he is."

Talbot did not suspect in the least how he was really regarded. He was delighted at the cordial reception he met with.

There was no reason for him to imagine that the friendship with which he was greeted was unreal.

Lillian, too, breathed freer. At first the visits seemed like the running of a gauntlet. Women have quicker and deeper perceptions than men, and are more suspicious.

Lillian did not fail to notice that the cordiality consisted to a large extent of curiosity. But Talbot was content, and she seemed so too.

Chapter 228

UNDER A CLOUD.

THE THREATENING clouds faded away and the young married couple again enjoyed hours of unalloyed happiness. In her gratitude to heaven, Lillian longed to do some good in the world. Through Dr. Van Buren she learned of the epidemic of disease which raged in the village and that many of the families were poverty stricken.

From others, she had heard that Dr. Van Buren not only went to the sick poor in his capacity of physician, but in other respects he helped them to the best of his ability.

Dr. Van Buren had told her of Ellen Knight, and her story affected Lillian deeply.

She pictured to herself how this delicately nurtured young woman had to bear not only poverty, but also her husband's brutality; how she had been veritably martyred.

Her sympathies were thoroughly aroused when Dr. Van Buren mentioned that she now nursed and cared for the man who had wrecked her life.

Lillian felt she wanted to know her. She seemed the personification of unselfishness.

One day she made an unexpected appearance at the little cottage. Ellen sat occupied with sewing at the window of the sick room.

The injured man was asleep in his bed. Lillian entered and motioned to the young woman to come into the living room.

At sight of Ellen Knight's face, Lillian paused in

surprise. Dr. Van Buren had not told her that the young woman was possessed of such unusual beauty.

Lillian introduced herself and added that she would be glad if she could do anything.

Ellen answered gratefully to the effect that Dr. Van Buren provided her with everything, but that she was glad to have Mrs. Talbot's sympathy.

Her husband was not doing well, she said. In the evening he was often feverish and delirious so that she frequently had a great deal of trouble to keep him in bed.

"And you are all alone with him?" asked Lillian in pity.

Ellen smiled wanly.

"I am used to it, Mrs. Talbot," she said. "I am not afraid of being alone; on the contrary, this silence does me a lot of good."

Lillian regarded her with warm interest. She greatly admired this woman. With what patience she endured her hard lot, and what purity of soul lay in her gentle features!

While they were still talking, Knight awoke, and through the door of the bed room, stared at the gracious, well dressed young woman who was with his wife.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Mrs. Talbot, John," his wife answered. "She has been kind enough to ask about you."

"About my condition?" the injured man laughed hoarsely. "No, no," he leered, "that is not why she has come. Her husband has sent her to spy on me. Don't worry, Burt, I will not give you away, but you will have to put up money—money—money——"

His words became incoherent as he began to rave.

Lillian started back somewhat terrified. A nameless dread of this man seized her. What did his ravings

mean?

"His mind often wanders," explained Ellen. "I pay no attention to what he says when he is delirious."

All at once Lillian felt as if the ground beneath her feet was burning.

After she had said a few more cordial words to Ellen and asked her to call on her for anything she might need, she stepped to Knight's bedside.

"I hope you will get better soon," she said, softly. "When the fever has gone away, I will send you some good wine."

"No, no!" cried Knight. "Nothing—send no wine —send nothing—I will not tell—I will not be bribed! You need not try—I will tell you nothing."

Hastily Lillian turned away, stepped back and bade Mrs. Knight good-bye. Her thoughts were in a whirl as she seated herself in her car.

What was on the injured man's mind? Had he really a secret which lay on his soul, or had she but heard the wanderings of a fevered brain? Poor Mrs. Knight, how she pitied her. Immersed in thought, she was driven to the village.

She went into a poverty-stricken hut where three children were lying ill. The scene was one of direst poverty.

The man, who was a farm laborer, spent in drink what he earned. The woman had done day labor for the support of herself and the children.

Now she had to be with them and could earn nothing, subsisting on charity alone.

Lillian's heart ached as she became aware of the full extent of the pitiable conditions. The woman herself was worn to a shadow—and then the poor children!

Fervently she wished that she could have entire control of her income to alleviate such poverty and

misery.

She rejoiced that her husband's means gave her the privilege and power to help; for she had not yet attained the control of her property and income.

She bent over the children with pity. They would perish if they did not receive proper care and nourishment soon.

How cold, and seemingly passive appeared the face of their mother! Could it be that her heart was not torn by the sight of her drooping children?

It was—she suffered in her own way. Misery and poverty had blunted the expression of her sensibilities. She was quiet, for weeping and complaint had never been effective.

She trembled as does every mother for her children, but she had lost all hope.

As Lillian stood up, she saw the woe begone look of the woman as she gazed upon her children, and realized that she was not without feeling.

She placed the entire contents of her purse on the table and promised to come daily and do what she could for the children.

"God bless you and reward you for your goodness!" thanked the poor woman with tears in her eyes, as Lillian turned to go.

Just then heavy footsteps were heard on the steps outside and in another moment an ungainly, awkward man opened the door.

Pausing on the threshold, he stared at the stranger.

"Well, who is your visitor, wife?" he asked in a voice made hoarse by drink.

"It's Mrs. Talbot," she answered. "She has given me money for the children, and promised to come again."

"She—help us?" laughed the man coarsely. "And do you take that money? You ought to be ashamed of yourself to take anything from them. Even if I am only a poor laborer, I'll have nothing to do with murderers! Not me."

Turning to Lillian, he went on. "You'll not wash away your sins by giving alms. Here, take your money back — we would rather starve than take it! There's blood on it!"

Deathly pale and trembling in every limb, Lillian had retreated from the horrible fellow.

Unable to restrain herself, she sobbed:

"No, no — that is untrue. My husband is noble and good. He is not a murderer!"

"No?" scoffed the man. "Of course not. He is Victor Talbot, and so they let him go. Little thieves are locked up, but big ones can go free. That's our fine justice!

"Even if they did let him go, we know he is a murderer! Just take your money back. We want nothing from you!" He gathered it together and threw it at her feet.

"Jim, are you crazy? The money—we need it." wailed the woman.

"Shut your mouth! Don't you touch it or——" he raised his clenched hand to strike.

Lillian roused herself and fled from the house as if followed by furies. Behind her she heard the man's drunken revilings.

Those who saw the face of the young woman as she rode home, were struck by its expression.

But poor Lillian knew nothing. She only wished to fly from those whom she had wished to help and who had hurt her so.

The shock proved too much for her. As she was

about to enter the house, she sank, with a low cry, in a swoon on the porch.

Talbot was in the woods to oversee the working of the saw mill. He had always commanded the respect of his men for he had ever been a just and liberal employer to all his help.

But things had changed; they seemed to be animated by other sentiments. They were no longer as attentive as before, and his orders seemed to be executed with a spirit of listlessness.

No longer was the work carried on as punctually as before.

When he appeared to direct them, they greeted him sullenly. Did he suspect what had caused this change?

He had always handled them like men; they had no reason to complain on that score. Why this antagonism, this dogged sullenness?

He became sharp and irritable. He flared up at trifles where formerly he had smiled good-humoredly.

Yes, he well knew what had caused the change. One listened to the gossip of the other. Despite his acquittal by the court, they felt they were working for a murderer.

On his day, too, as he approached, his brow clouded. Instead of finding them busily at work, the men stood in a group, talking vehemently.

Their tools lay on the ground. Over there, Bill Haller, one of his oldest men, had a pipe in his mouth, and smoking in the woods was strictly forbidden.

The blood rushed to Talbot's head.

As he stepped up to the men, they turned, as it seemed to him, with intentional slowness back to their work.

They did not greet him at all, and Haller uncon-

cernedly kept the pipe in his mouth.

Talbot's temper burst its bounds. This impudence was more than he could tolerate.

Walking straight up to the man, he exclaimed:

"Take that pipe out of your mouth at once, or I will do it! You deserve to be discharged on the spot."

The ax which Bill Haller held in his hand fell to the ground. With angry face he stood erect.

"You may discharge me for all I care!" he cried. "I guess I can get another job, I don't have to work for a ——" As he saw the fire in Talbot's eyes, he did not dare to end the sentence.

As if struck by a blow, Victor stepped back. Had matters gone so far, that he would be called "murderer" to his face?

"Hound!" he gnashed, but the man interrupted.

"I guess I'll quit work right now," said Haller, "I don't think I care to work here."

With a bound Victor had caught the man by the throat, but his reason returned immediately.

"You had better go, and that at once," he said in a low, constrained voice.

He turned his back to the group. Bill Haller's jeering laugh rang behind him as he went on his way. He felt as though something within him had been suddenly broken.

Deeply humiliated, his eyes fell to the ground as he dried the cold drops of sweat on his brow.

His gloom became intensified with every step he took. In the eyes of his own men he had sunk so low that they had forgotten the duty and respect they owed him and showed their feelings openly.

The veins in his temples swelled and stood out in high relief. His spirit chafed at his terrible position.

But what was he to do? How could he change

matters? What good would it do to swear, "Before God, I am innocent!" They would laugh at him. No, any struggle against this tide of feeling was useless. He must resign himself to his fate.

Chapter 229

PITILESS GOSSIPS

VICTOR TALBOT threw himself on the moss in a secluded spot and dropped his head upon his hands. He could not go home in this state of mind. Lillian must not see him. She must not know what a destructive storm had passed over him. He would not go home before he had recovered himself.

His wife! He was ready to bear without a murmur all that might come, if only she was spared the suffering, she, who had cast her lot with his.

Was it not a consolation for him in his trouble that he had her, who had been true to him in spite of everything—in sorrow and in joy?

At last he arose and a weary smile played about his lips.

In his tribulations, God had sent a ray of sunlight to brighten the darkness which beset his path.

Continued in next number

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